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Vaughan*  **issue: July/August 2008 Where's the Growth?**  http://www.rev.org/articles/graphics/0708/MegaChurch1_opt.jpeg  The 38-year history of megachurch growth speaks for itself:   * **1970**: There were about 10 known megachurches (defined as a Protestant church with at least 2,000 average weekly attendance) in America. * **1984**: If your church had an average weekly attendance of 2,000, it would have been among the 100 largest churches in America. * **2000**: Your church would have needed an average weekly attendance of 5,000 to be among the 100 largest churches. * **2006**: There were more than 1,400 megachurches. * **2007**: A weekly attendance of 5,000 would barely include you among the 200 largest churches because the 100 largest churches start at 7,100 and the largest now has more than 46,000 attendance. * **2008**: A megachurch is emerging, on average, every one to three days in America.   How can pastors and other leaders of smaller churches digest the meaning of this phenomenal growth? Have megachurches found "secrets" to church growth that can always be replicated elsewhere? Have megachurch pastors watered down the gospel to make it attractive to seekers? Has God chosen to bless a tiny percentage of huge churches with exponential growth, while allowing the vast majority of churches to stagnate and decline?  In my work with Church Growth Today, I have been studying the phenomenon of the megachurch since 1984, and I've spent the last three years visiting 300 of the largest American and Canadian megachurches in 60 cities and 25 states and provinces. Like all churches, they have had their problems and crises. However, I have found them to be doing several things well. And the irony is that the things they do well can and should be done by churches of all sizes. What follows are seven of the ways megachurches have found to grow.  **1. Unleash the church to serve others**  Lutheran Church of Hope in West Des Moines, Iowa, has a ministry for hungry people in its city. This 4,800-attendance church meets in a worship center seating only 750 and meets in 10 weekend services. In one month, they delivered 205 dozen cookies and 1,024 complete lunches to hungry people who are not members of their church.  You may be a smaller church with limited resources. But what are you doing and what could you do? Can you make a dozen cookies? 10 dozen cookies? 20 dozen cookies? Look for the idea rather than just the amount given by the larger church.  Since its beginning, Horizon Christian Fellowship of San Diego has reached multitudes of homeless and unchurched people in its city. Attendees distribute tons of clothes and food to families and individuals both in their city and around the world. While their facility has no crosses, the worship center entrance displays photos of people from around the world. Behind the worship center speaker stand, in large scripted letters, is the name "Jesus." His name is boldly and intentionally planted in full view to impact the minds and hearts of all who meet their people and visit their services.  Richmond Outreach Center of Richmond, Virginia, is led by Geronimo Aguilar, biker and former Los Angeles gang member. This inner city church started in 2001 with 21 people and now averages more than 4,000 people each weekend. The name of Jesus and the word "sin" are used unapologetically at this church that sees lives radically changed each week. The attendees have shaven heads, tattoos, "Bikers for Christ" vests, "Satan Sucks" T-shirts, and no-nonsense messages about Jesus. Twenty-four area churches that could never reach troubled teens and gang members as effectively as The ROC regularly support and refer youth and others as a community of churches.  **2. Be an accessible pastor**  The late Jerry Falwell once advised pastors to "walk slowly through the crowd." Minutes of being accessible before and after services can save you hours in the office and on the phone.  When pastors simply stand still before and after worship services or in designated reception areas, members and visitors can share in a moment what could have been a 30-minute office visit. Even then most pastors of large churches still have members that may never meet them face to face or simply shake hands. For some people mere one-on-one direct eye contact and a smile can create a sense of acknowledgment that makes meeting with delegated staff members more acceptable.  Many members of larger churches have greater kingdom motivations than merely having the senior pastor shake their hands. Many left churches where that may have been about all they received. Even Jesus needed to multiply ministry through the disciples and spent most of his time with them.  **3. Multiply leaders**  Unless you're able to multiply leaders, your ministry may well become a one-generation event or a curse to your successor. New leaders and new groups increase ownership in shared ministry that can allow continued growth during times of conflict and community transitions.  These viral converts, in sufficient number, ignite and invite great growth. Churches respond to the rate of numerical gain in new believers and members in different ways. In Acts 6:1 this multiplied growth resulted in both neglect and conflict that was resolved by the addition of both leaders and ministry.  Wayne Cordeiro, pastor of Hawaii's New Hope Christian Fellowship (14,000 attendance), has masterfully demonstrated the vital role of multiplying leaders by leaders mentoring leaders. Mac Brunson, pastor of the 7,500-attendance First Baptist Church in Jacksonville, Florida, also leads a church that for decades had modeled the importance of multiplying Sunday school classes and new leaders.  As a pastor, do you focus on discipling people in general or leaders in particular? How can you multiply your impact by investing time and energy primarily in those who will lead ministries within your church and community?  **4. Dream big -- really big**  Bill Bright often shared with Campus Crusade staff that minds and hearts are not inflamed by small ideas. Church leaders at First Baptist Church of Hammond, Indiana, and First Assembly of God in Phoenix have influenced multitudes of former unchurched people (who now belong to their churches) and thousands of pastors in seminars to plan kingdom-size big.  When Albuquerque's Legacy Church planned its Big Day for Sunday, March 16 of this year, the 4,000-attendance church set a big goal of 6,500 attendance and 250 new believers. That Sunday 8,192 attended and at least 290 became new believers.  You can plan big events even though they may not be able to draw thousands or hundreds. How can you bring a lot of people into your property for a family fun event, concern, comedy night, or special event? Creating a buzz in your church and community will do a lot to help people think of your church as a happening congregation.  **5. Serve people you'll never meet**  Growing churches know that kingdom ministry is larger than their own ministries. Many decide to share their resources and influence by partnering with groups that already specialize and are connected locally, nationally, or globally for ministry.  Antioch Church of Overland Park, Kansas, has an on-site room dedicated specifically for food to be used for compassion ministry purposes. Prince of Peace Lutheran Church in Burnsville, Minnesota, uses a similar dedicated space.  Several churches, such as San Diego's Horizon Christian Fellowship, have dedicated space for processing clothes to be distributed by missionaries in several countries as well as to people who are homeless in San Diego's Balboa Park.  Lutheran Church of Hope, mentioned earlier, prepared a million meals for children in Uganda during Lent 2007. The meals were prepared by assembly lines of six members each that bagged vitamin-enriched rice and other foods. They partnered with Minnesota-based Kids Against Hunger as their food supply and distribution source. Depending on international supply and cost of rice, one 50-pound bag of rice can feed about 50 children.  Vineyard Anaheim Christian Fellowship, with about 1,500 attendance, has both storage (130 bays) and a processing warehouse (100 bays). Average food storage capacity at a time can range from 150,000 to 200,000 pounds. About 50 to 75 members serve to distribute approximately 2,000 pounds of food seven days a week to area families in need. The ministry is totally funded by members of the church.  The Rock Church, San Bernardino, receives food from various partners across America and seeds food into 46 other ministries. The church also served more than 813,000 people full meals in 2007. The church serves more than 300 homeless people each month. They provide full lunches and vast amounts of clothing, jackets, and blankets. More than 300 flu vaccinations were administered with a donation from the Department of Public Health. Free dental care is provided to more than 100 children once each year. Their monthly inner city Operation ReachOut, which takes free items and a message of hope, served about 900 children and youth last year. Their Winter Coat Exchange received more than 300 new coats in 2007 for redistribution to children. The Back to School Bash each year distributes more than 5,000 backpacks filled with school supplies and a new pair of shoes for each child.  The story of these churches is shared to assure you that you are not alone in your outreach and compassion efforts. Just as most of you did not know about them before you read it today, they don't know about all that you are doing, and will do, in that special place where God has put you.  **6. Get your focus off your facilities**  Just when you think your buildings are large enough, as important as they are to ministry, you realize that you must discover more innovative ways of multiplying leaders and groups in your limited space.  In Luke 14:23, Jesus said, "Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled" (NKJV). He meant more than just the capacity of our classrooms and worship spaces. He was talking about multitudes and myriads (tens of thousands). In John 14:2-3 Jesus also said, "In my Father's house are many mansions…" indicating both the location of his "house" and the magnitude as being "many mansions." We are talking kingdom-size big.  American churches have had multi-site churches for at least 100 years, when First Baptist Church of Dallas, Texas, had about one-third of its Sunday morning attendance in off-campus sites. Third world megachurches have had multi-site churches for at least 20 years.  The church I attend, First Baptist Church of Bolivar, Missouri, with attend-ance of about 1,000 people each week, has had a second site for 10 years. We bought the oldest theater in town that had remained empty for more than a year. Our purpose for beginning the off-site was to reach people in our area that would probably never attend our church. The issue was not about space problems but about reaching people different from us.  Since the year 2000 there has been a popular awakening to the idea of multi-site church campuses. The result, whatever the motives of churches, is that many more people are now being reached through smaller "mansions."  The 2007 Church Growth Today list of the 200 largest U.S. churches indicates that 55 of the 100 largest churches (7,100 to 46,300 attendance) report having multi-site campuses. Twelve of the 100 reported having five or more sites. The next 100 largest churches (attend-ance of 5,000 to 7,000) have an additional 42 churches with more than one campus. Three of these churches report having five or more sites.  **7. Keep hoping, no matter what**  One of the myths about America's megachurches is that they all had easy growth. The truth is that there are churches among them that faced dreadful challenges and were about to close their doors. Some, like many smaller churches, did cease to exist.  Second Baptist Church of Houston, now the second largest church in the nation, had experienced devastating decline until Edwin Young (father of Ed Young) came as their pastor with part of the staff from his previous church. NorthRidge Church in Plymouth, Michigan, was formerly Temple Baptist Church (Redford, Detroit) that had been in steep decline for three decades. Today NorthRidge is the largest church in Michigan.  Do what you can, with all that you can, with as many as you can, as soon as you can for the kingdom's sake. You cannot do everything, but together we can all do more than we have done. Hopefully, you are more aware that megachurches, like smaller churches, have no monopoly on ideas, on growth, on pain, on opposition, or on God's Holy Spirit.  *JOHN N. VAUGHAN is the founder of Church Growth Today (churchgrowthtoday .org) and has researched and published the lists of the 100 largest and 100 fastest growing American churches since 1985. He's the author of America's Most Influential Churches, The New Century (Church Growth Today).* |